

Distributing past exams, lecture notes and a FAQ file: Benefits and pitfalls

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Over many years of teaching intro Bio to over 3000 students now, it is apparent to me that many of the students have anxieties and false assumptions about the difficulty level of the material and the exams, how their abilities compare with others in the class, and how their numerical scores will translate into a letter grade. In recent years I have been providing, at the start of the course: PDF files of all lecture notes, a collection of many past exams, and a detailed FAQ (frequently-asked questions) that addresses many of the questions I have heard over the years. These have leveled the playing field and eliminated time spent answering questions about course mechanics, plus students have a reference of the course material. However, the overall performance of the students has not changed much, which suggests that while some students may become empowered to do better, others may be misusing the resources or ignoring them.

You can download samples of these from the BLC Wiki Site.

The Benefits

- Goals are empowerment and responsibility
- Puts all course information in the hands of the students before the course starts
- Playing field is leveled as all students have access
- Most of the advice applies to all Science courses
- Students cannot blame poor performance on lack of access to resources, or being too intimidated to ask questions
- Eliminates questions about course grades, focuses office hours & discussions on course material – *this has saved hours of time.*
- I have shared these materials with other instructors – *helps in consistency of course offerings and in recruiting new instructors on our campus*

Past Exams

- Multiple-choice with answer key, past performance metrics on the front
- Five most recent Midterms and three Finals
- The Finals have a comprehensive answer key (each answer is explained)
- *Students can assess expectations*
- *Self-test using active learning*
- *Students should see that questions are new; eliminates benefit of memorizing answers*
- *Material for office hours / Discussions*

Lecture Notes

- Relevant pages in text are indicated
- Learning Outcomes/Goals
- Contain images used in class
- Study questions
- *More concise than the textbook*
- *No need to write everything down in class*
- *A reference for what got covered*

FAQ File

- Responses to 60 questions/comments about the course based on 10+ years of teaching
- Typical grade distributions
- Teaching philosophy
- How grades are assigned
- Predict-your-grade after Midterm 2
- What it takes to do well – links to useful sites
- The document gets updated regularly
- *Prevents emails about course mechanics*
- *A good reference for students and instructors*

Other materials

- Syllabus
- Links to YouTube videos shown in class
- Table of textbook pages for older editions
- Concepts Quiz about misconceptions
- Clicker questions (as course proceeds)
 - No points for clickers, so class attendance becomes voluntary, but at least I can re-use the questions.

The Pitfalls

- Have to make new exam questions every time
- Other instructors face higher expectations
- Many students become obsessed with past exams, but most misuse them
- Some students may feel free to skip class, but this makes the room quieter
- At least a few students may become overwhelmed and adjust their expectations lower, but this would happen anyways

Conclusions

- Class time, office hours, discussion no longer see questions about grades
- No emails about grades during or after the course
- Evaluations have stayed the same or gone up
- Student performance has stayed similar
 - Some students likely benefit, but most do not
- For the future:
 - Discussion quiz on the meta-materials to motivate students to read them
 - Post-course assessment on whether students felt the materials helped them